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C O N F I D E N T I A L ABUJA 002750

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR DRL, AF/W AND AF/RA
AF/W FOR PARKS, EPSTEIN
DRL FOR TOMLYANOVICH

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/24/2006
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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: BENUE UPDATE

REF: (A) ABUJA 2708

Classified by Charge Timothy Andrews, for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

11. (C) accounts by press and diplomatic personnel, often sourced to credible eyewitnesses, basically corroborate reftel account. The destruction appears to be more widespread than was initially reported. British High Commission personnel evacuated DFID staff from Makurdi yesterday. One DFID staff member reported "many" charred vehicles and bodies strewn on the highway south of Makurdi. Internally displaced persons confirmed the path of the Army units involved in this action, adding that most villages along the highway between Katsina-Ala and Zaki Biam were destroyed. The medium-sized town of Zaki Biam is reported to have been essentially destroyed.

12. (C) Ambassador Jeter spoke to Governor Akume of Benue, who claims to have internally displaced persons from the area number well over 100,000. Given the density of the rural population in Benue and Taraba this number could be accurate. These are in addition to approximately 60,000 persons who fled the conflict in Nasarawa and Taraba. The director of the ICRC in Lagos indicated the Red Cross would conduct a field study this weekend of DP settlements in Benue and Taraba, and would report the findings to us on October 30.

13. (C) Comment: While we cannot yet gauge the full dimensions of this situation, we wanted to alert the Department to the possibly severe humanitarian challenge. The violence has subsided for now. Out of the smoke and ash, the weight of the emerging evidence points to army brutality. Media and official sources disagree on which Army units may have been involved. Claims from some quarters that those responsible were anti-Tiv militiamen do not appear credible. Many here, while unhappy about the dimensions of the Army's actions, felt that the FG needed to send a strong signal regarding the effects of killing soldiers, who are the final guarantors--if also occasionally the violators--of civil order in Nigeria. It is, however, uncertain from what level of the military or Federal Government the order to proceed was given. Equally uncertain is what the order said about use of lethal force. End Comment.
Jeter